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# U.S. Aides Split On How to Use New Contra Aid

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 — The Reagan Administration is divided over how to spend \$100 million in aid to the Nicaraguan rebels and is debating what goals can be reasonably achieved with the money, according to Administration officials.

The officials said there had been disagreements between military planners, who favor gradual improvements in the rebel forces, and some senior policy makers, who see the need for more tangible military victories that could win Congressional renewal of the funding.

"There is a tension between the planners and the politicians," one Administration official said.

## Backed by Reagan

The House and the Senate, after cutting off military aid for more than two years, narrowly approved the \$100 million after a sustained lobbying campaign by President Reagan.

The officials said that one issue that had been debated was whether to organize the rebels, known as contras, in traditional military battalions or as smaller, irregular guerrilla units. The battalions would be more appropriate for taking territory, a goal that officials said was beyond the immediate ability of the contras.

"It's important to note that these questions are all being asked by everybody," said one official. "This is not a division between Department of Defense and State, or between hard-liners and soft-liners. There are no arguments about these questions. There's been discussion, as you would expect."

A range of officials agreed that the \$100 million would not come close to ousting the Sandinistas. They said that within six months it was likely the Administration would ask Congress to extend and expand the aid program.

On Friday, President Reagan officially issued the first \$60 million in aid and signed documents that allow the Central Intelligence Agency to resume its aid to the rebels. Under the legislation, the C.I.A. is once again permitted to assist the contras with a complete range of planning and advice, provided its agents do not operate inside Nicaragua or within 20 miles of its border.

The Administration has said the State Department is to provide "policy guidance," with the day-to-day operations directed by the C.I.A.

This week, the National Security Council stepped up its planning for various "contingencies," the officials said. They declined to elaborate.

The first step for the contras, the officials said, will be training by members of the Army's special forces, popularly known as the Green Berets.

The officials said the money would be used to buy communications equipment, transportation and better weapons, particularly hand-held antiaircraft missiles needed to counter the Sandinistas' armored helicopter gunships.

The planning for how the \$100 million is to be spent is still taking shape, and the officials were reluctant to disclose details. Nonetheless, several issues seemed clear.

## No Threat to Hold Territory

At least in the initial phases, the officials said, the contras are not a threat to take and hold any significant amount of Nicaraguan territory. American officials have at various times drawn up plans for the contras to capture part of Nicaragua, declare a provisional government and have the United States break diplomatic relations with Managua.

Just this week, rumors swirled through Washington that the Administration was on the verge of breaking diplomatic relations with Nicaragua. Knowledgeable officials dismissed the speculation, noting that the embassy in Managua was a valuable platform for the overt and covert intelligence collection. Reporting from the embassy, the officials said, would be an important barometer of the contras' success in winning popular support.

Although some of the contra leaders have spoken in recent months of capturing territory when American aid resumes, several Administration officials sought to play down such expectations. "I don't think dramatic shows in the first few months is something we should be disappointed not to see," one official said.

## 'Like to Back a Winner'

This official noted that the Administration was acutely conscious of pressures on Capitol Hill from opponents and reluctant supporters of the program. "They like to back a winner," the official said. "If we provide money for military assistance and it's used incompetently, there will be repercussions. Competence is expected."

But the contras are beset by several significant weaknesses.

According to recent calculations by the Defense Department, the Sandinista force numbers more than 75,000 regulars backed by 44,000 reservists.

The contras claim to have about 22,000 people under arms.

Nicaragua has an air force that includes MI-24 helicopter gunships, with pilots trained in counterinsurgency tactics by Soviet and Cuban advisers. The Soviet tactics for countering guerrilla struggles have been honed in recent years of combat in Afghanistan.

"You can't do much," an official said, "when the other guys have an air force and you don't."

One method for countering the Sandinistas' superior air cover is deployment of hand-held antiaircraft weaponry like the Soviet-built SAM-7. But as the American-backed rebels in Afghanistan have learned, this weapon, and others like it, is not always effective. The helicopter gunships are equipped with devices to fool the missiles' guidance systems, and effective firing of the weapon takes a certain amount of practice.

## Superior Artillery

In addition to superiority in the air, the Sandinistas have enjoyed superior artillery and have been able previously to dislodge contra emplacements with heavy bombardment.

For these reasons, the contras main military tactic in the coming months is likely to be an increase in the hit-and-run attacks already used. Officials said the pace and intensity of these attacks were likely to be increased.

One option proposed by some officials would be some sort of dramatic commando raid in Managua. The Sandinistas gained much credibility with a dramatic taking of hostages in 1978. But Administration officials said the great majority of the rank-and-file contras were from rural parts of Nicaragua, and they have thus far proved ill-suited to infiltration of the cities.

The eventual hope for the contras, the officials said, would include continued internal weakening of the Sandinistas. Several officials expressed the hope that increased military pressure by the contras could some day stir a popular revolution similar to those in Haiti, the Philippines and Poland.

## Military Limits Desertions

These officials acknowledged, however, that it could take years for such a strategy to succeed against the Sandinistas' highly effective domestic counterintelligence and security networks.

In the early years of the war, the Nicaraguans suffered a high rate of desertions from its army, which includes large numbers of conscripts. But that problem, Administration officials said, has been largely solved by Sandinista threats to withhold ration cards for the families of deserters.

One indication of the ferment over planning for the contras is a document being circulated among senior Administration officials entitled "How to Win in Nicaragua."

The paper, a 19-page analysis, was written by Democrats and Nicaraguans. One of the contributors was Bernard Aronson, a Washington-based political consultant and Democrat who wrote President Reagan's most recent speech on Central America.

The analysis urges the Administration to resist pressure from Congress and skeptics of the \$100 million aid program "to prove quickly that their investment will pay off." It urges the Administration to prepare for a long, sustained struggle in the region against the Sandinistas.

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The core of the report is a recommendation that the Administration take seriously the portions of the contra aid legislation that require human rights improvements and a broadening of the contras' political base.

If the contras are involved in atrocities, the analysis said, those will be widely publicized by the Sandinistas, with devastating effects on American opinion and support for the program. If such abuses take place, "Nothing could be more disastrous to sustaining support for the Administration's policy in Congress or in the country."

On the military side, the analysis urges the contras to try to take Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, as opposed to returning to a strategy of opening fronts in the north and south. A provisional government could then be established, with the possible use of American naval forces to blockade the supply lines, the analysis says.